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ABSTRACT

African schools rarely present instruction in the students' native languages. The language of instruction tends to be of European origin. What results is a civilized elite which is unsuccessful in bringing knowledge to the vast majority of the population. A project in Cameroon proposes to teach through extensive trilingualism. First, children learn reading, writing, and arithmetic via the local language. At the same time the children begin to learn one of the "official" languages, which may become the primary language of instruction. Later, students learn a third language, which may be either the second official language or the local tongue of a neighboring community. Such an effort was conducted from 1981 to 1987. Students expressed themselves better and performed slightly better in arithmetic, and about equally well in French, as did a control group. Teaching in the local language is a necessary part of preserving the local culture. Failing to promote the culture would amount to promoting alienation and harming self-esteem. Discrepancies between theory and practice would only be reinforced through setting apart the official language and the vernacular. Despite years of promoting official languages, the local tongue is still the main vehicle of communication. Using local language in education would signal that one can be educated but still retain African culture. (SG)

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# CONTRIBUTION OF EDUCATION TO CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

## "Which language for teaching? The cultural messages transmitted by the languages used in education"

by

Elisabeth Gfeller and Clinton Robinson
Société Internationale de Linguistique
Cameroon

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# Which language for teaching?

## The cultural messages transmitted by the languages used in education

by
Elisabeth GFELLER and Clinton ROBINSON
Société Internationale de Linguistique
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# Which language for teaching?
# the cultural messages transmitted by the languages used in education

Elisabeth GFELLER and Clinton ROBINSON

## 1. Introduction

Rare are the schools in Africa which use the mother tongue of the children. In general the language of instruction is one of European-origin, most often English or French. This fact has been widely criticised. In a few instances, attempts have been made to effect a change, but this system remains the most 'normal' in many African countries - especially those which are francophone. Are people unaware of the damage caused by this system? Do they not see how it may be changed? Is the present situation preferable to any kind of change or do people not dare to address the numerous problems involved in such a change? Are the present disadvantages considered slight compared with the 'risks' of a type of education which includes the mother tongue, or does the desire exist, but not the means? The questions are seemingly endless...

It is not the aim of this article to answer these questions or to judge their importance. Rather it hopes to contribute to the debate on the integration of local languages into educational systems, particularly in a multilingual African milieu (cf. CONFEMEN 1986). In the light of an experiment carried out in Cameroon we will attempt to bring out the opposing cultural messages transmitted by means of the official language (OL) compared with the use of the indigenous language (first language = L1).

## 2. Official language: present situation

The effects of an imported educational system have been extensively described, without, however, the linguistic factor being particularly emphasised. Mbuagbaw (1984) defines the problem as a lack of integration of 'imported' knowledge with local realities:

> The Techno-African has a colonial mould of thought and his mental structure leads him to look for identical concepts

> in the African situation through the spectacles of the former colonial masters. He appears to be involved in discovering African thought and comparing that at the same time with Western patterns of thought as a justification for validity (...) He has learnt to depend on the book and to treat it as an infallible guide because of the validity of the logical presentation of facts, little realising that facts in the book are often far away from the realities of life. The Techno-African is a man of the book, always quoting from it, and quite often he is very unfamiliar with the realities of the African situation because to him, it should be like what the book has said and defined. While in an African village he remembers all the professors told him and what he read in books. But he does not see the African realities in and around the 'poor'-looking hut and its occupants, living monuments of African civilisation and living libraries of African culture. (Mbuagbaw 1984:15)

This alienation by the OL is felt not only by some expatriates 'nostalgic' for the primitive life and by African linguists, but also by development agents who work with the local population and realise that it is impossible to communicate effectively by means of the official language. These agents are confronted by the problem that the instruction they give depends on the (often limited) technical knowledge of their interpreters; moreover, written instruction is not of much value, for not everyone can read or understand it. The distribution of brochures in local languages proves difficult through the lack of competent writers - people have not been taught at school to write the languages spoken in the villages. Such a group of people can be instructed only in a language seldom used within the community.

Nobody underestimates the importance given to the education sector in Africa nor the enormous efforts devoted to the africanisation of the school curriculum, but it remains true that Mbuagbaw's remark is still valid:

> In spite of the colossal achievements in number and diversity in education, the present structure of education appears inadequate and ineffective in terms of the deployment of the products through the schools and for the labour market. (Mbuagbaw 1984:77)

So it is no exaggeration to claim that the school within a Western tradition has been unable to attain its aims in the case of 80% of the rural population. It has succeeded in creating a civilised élite, which is unsuccessful in popularising its knowledge and in conveying the importance

of such knowledge to the most deprived that is, to the majority of the population. In terms of socio-cultural impact, the present use of the official language has created two social classes, the élite and the masses, the distinctive marks of which are mainly the presence or absence of an imported cultural veneer. The mastery of a language is perhaps the most striking manifestation of this fact. In the setting of a research programme in Cameroon the following observations have been collected, illustrating both the social distance and the developing awareness of a member of the élite:

> Researcher: "We who work for the national languages have never made much effort in order that the others understand what it is we want. Each of us must make more effort, not only among intellectuals, but also in the popular areas. That is even easier for they have nothing to lose. The intellectuals fear that they may well lose their 'savoir-faire', their superiority over the others because they speak French or English. With national languages, they think, I shall be placed on the same social level as the others, I shall not have my intellectual halo which I have when I speak grand French. Many intellectuals have that fear."
> Interviewer: "So the superiority of the intellectual is in his mastery of the French language?"
> Researcher: "Yes, it gives him status. With the national language he realises that the villager is going to teach him things, they are afraid of that. On the other hand, knowledge concerns everyone, and everyone must make his contribution to it. For example, my work and my thesis were an opportunity for the villagers to enrich us. And I brought them the spelling book. The women wanted to know how to write the new spelling. It was explained to them and then they said, "Now we can write to our children, they will no longer call us peasants." These people expect something from us even in their own language which we are not giving them. We do not approach them, we do not inform them, we are widening the gap every day. They expect people to tell them that they are not illiterate, peasants, that they are like us all, men who are not inferior to us. It is up to us to tell them that they possess a treasure which is theirs to exploit, we must tell them this: you know, you have such wealth, make the most of it."

This realisation brings out clearly the consequences of the exclusion of local languages from the educational system. As we have already said elsewhere, on one hand the local language is excluded from the person's intellectual development process, and, on the other, it is never the subject of any scientific analysis:

> - success in education is dependent on success in French, and therefore intellectual training and advancement have nothing to do with the local language and culture; rather, education is a process of distancing oneself increasingly from local culture; education never comes to the child by means of the local language.
> - the local language and culture are of little or no intellectual interest or value since they are never the object of systematic inquiry or description in school. (Robinson 1991:134)

Could the teaching of national languages in school possibly remedy this situation? The PROPELCA experiment in Cameroon will serve as an example. An enquiry among the school staff participating in the experiment provided statements of opinion which will serve to illuminate this question. These staff worked in the western system (francophone and anglophone) of the country as well as in the experiment of a bilingual system (local language and official language - English or French.)

## 3. Local and official languages: PROPELCA experiment

### 3.1 The concept

The 'Projet de recherche opérationelle pour l'enseignement des langues au Cameroun' (PROPELCA) - in English: Operational Research Project for the Teaching of Languages in Cameroon - proposes to incorporate the teaching of languages in school based on the principle of extensive trilingualism (Tadadjeu 1984) which is reckoned to be the concept best adapted to linguistic reality - not only that of Cameroon but also of many other African countries.

This concept arises from the fact that every African needs at least two or three foreign languages in order to function adequately with the members of his community of origin, with the members of other communities and at national and international levels. The assumption is that it would be necessary to master the languages orally and in writing. Many are the Cameroonians and Africans who speak three languages or more, but rare are those who write them.

> The typical Cameroonian of the future will be the one who has the ability to communicate in three languages of which at least one will have to be a Cameroonian language (preferably his mother tongue), the other his first official language (French for francophones, English for anglophones). The third language should be for some a

> Cameroonian vehicular language and for others the second official language (English for francophones, French for anglophones.) (Tadadjeu 1984:80)

Extensive trilingualism presents several advantages compared with other concepts aimed at the teaching of national languages.

> - it aims at bilingualism (L1, OL) from the beginning admitting that one cannot omit learning either language without encountering problems.
>
> - in principle, each local language finds its place in this concept. One or several are not chosen to the detriment of others. The practical application is supposed to be according to demographic, linguistic and sociological criteria and with the collaboration of the committees of the respective languages.
>
> - it allows a cultural implantation and integration in the respective communities such as the western style school has rarely known; it also allows the participation of parents and members of the community in education as well as the participation of senior pupils in the life of the community.
>
> - small children enter a school which allows them to make full use of what they have already learnt - they do not begin from scratch. Links with the life of the community throughout the years of schooling are more easily maintained than if most schools use a language different from that of the community, above all rural and urban working class.

3.2 The curriculum

The concept of extensive trilingualism applied to the field of education affects both primary and secondary students. In the curriculum, basic knowledge (reading, writing, arithmetic) is taught first of all in and through the local language. At the same time the first official language is introduced as a school subject. Up to the third school year the first official language gains in importance so that it may become the language of instruction; from the fourth year local culture, history, and geography are taught through the local language.

In the secondary school some basic linguistic principles are taught which allow the pupil to cope more easily with other national languages. At this level the pupil learns his third language, (choice: second official language or a vehicular language or even a local neighbouring language.

according to the needs of the pupils and the possibilities of the school.) As long as this programme remains experimental, the secondary pupils will not yet acquire written knowledge of their mother tongue; for this reason at least a passive understanding of the written indigenous language (L1) is taught wherever possible.

**3.3 The experiment**

The experiment took place from 1981 to 1987 in several areas of Cameroon, beginning with two local languages and extending progressively to eight as well as the two official languages. A team made up of members of the University, of the 'Centre de Recherches et Etudes Anthropologiques' (CREA) and the Societe Internationale de Linguistique (SIL) organised the project in collaboration with the Catholic and Protestant education authorities. The number of participating schools increased from two, at the beginning, to twenty at present, within the existing school structures.

The PROPELCA team produced the necessary books (printed by local printing firms) in collaboration with the respective leading officials of the Protestant and Catholic organisations; it retrained the teachers stressing the written knowledge of the local language and the philosophy and pedagogy of bilingual education. The assessment evaluation of the pupils and the choice of teachers was the responsibility of the school authorities.

The experiment was evaluated partly by the team itself, where continuous interval evaluation is concerned, and partly by an expert of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), for the pre-final and final evaluation.

**3.4 The results**

For the presentation of the results we rely on Tadajeu (1990). In accordance with the planned programme, the first three school classes were given bilingual education. The teaching of local culture to the subsequent classes was not established (lack of finances and staff, resistance to teaching in L1 etc.).

In general, it can be stated that the pupils have attained the same level as their classmates in the control classes; in the end-of-year examinations (official examinations) their average performance was at approximately the

same level where French was concerned, slightly better in arithmetic, and, in addition, they had knowledge of their own written language (which was not examined in the control classes). According to the teachers, the children expressed themselves with more facility, first in their own language and subsequently in the official language, generally they preferred being taught in their own language rather than in the official language.

Therefore as far as classroom instruction as such is concerned we can make two observations about implicit cultural messages: firstly, intellectual development is not at all compromised by the use of the local language, rather the opposite. Secondly, pupils' attitudes show a preference for this method. These observations show once more the advantages of grounding learning in local socio-cultural realities by the use of the local language in teaching.

The problems with which we were most concerned were not problems of methodology but rather of administration. Other problems were not peculiar to the experiment but are part of the general situation of the country (minimal teacher training, economic situation of staff and teaching establishments, large classes, etc.). The experimental nature of the classes in a school and of the schools in a given area influenced staff motivation, especially that of the primary school teachers and head teachers. A continuous raising of the awareness of the highest authorities concerning the existence and administrative consequences of this experimentation proved necessary, but could not always be implemented. For example, the authorities were to assume responsibility for the placing of staff trained for the project and the special examinations in L1. The official 'non-existence' of the L1s caused problems when speakers of neighbouring languages to those in which the experiment was taking place, wanted to start the programme in their school. This fact also influenced the general lack of information among the population (parents, authorities, communities) about the possibilities and limits of the L1s and a bilingual L1/OL system of education.

4. The impact of bilingual instruction L1/OL

The importance of the PROPELCA project should not be overestimated: ten years of experimentation in around twenty schools with very few

accompanying actions can only give an indication of what one might expect if such instruction were to be generalized and continued for at least a generation. Only such a perspective would allow a comparison with the impact of the western system. The participants in the project (teachers, directors, inspectors, education secretaries, researchers) have, however, been reflecting on it through the years of this experiment. Some of their impressions, individual and collective, have been recorded and will be the subject of a forthcoming evaluation (Gfeller, forthcoming). We record here certain of these observations on the subject of the cultural revaluation and socio-intellectual discrepancies.

4.1 Cultural revaluation

For us, the value of maintaining the cultural heritage does not consist in the first instance of purely folklore aspects of the culture of the African ethnic groups. Rather, it is a matter of those thriving cultural aspects of a large number of Cameroonians and Africans i.e. their lifestyle, how they communicate and organise themselves as a society. Even if one cannot deny that tradition and culture are sometimes seen as an idealised past that we would regret losing, there is another side: the tradition which forms part of the daily life of a large part of the population, but which is rarely mentioned in formal circumstances nor taught on the same footing as other subjects of 'modern' life (e.g. transport, administration of the country, etc.).

The opinion of all those interviewed is clear: to keep the culture and customs, the language of the ethnic group is needed. Ethnic history, their social and political organisation, rites, customs, knowing how to behave properly, knowledge of the immediate environment with its plants and their medical uses, the historical and spiritual importance of certain places, geographical knowledge of the area - is all transmitted through the language. The 'wisdom of the elders who express themselves in proverbs' - the art of using language and knowledge in a current situation, an art which it is difficult to understand and imitate if one has not actually lived the experience oneself - has also been emphasised.

> Interviewer: "Do you have difficulty finding a word if you have to explain a cultural fact in French?"
> Researcher: "No. That I learned at school, my diplomas are all in French.

> Interviewer: "And what about if it involves the history of your village, its social structures?"
> Researcher: "Ah yes, that's different. Then there are bound to be points where the right word has to be sought out. For example, the hierarchy of the society is not the same as you find in French. Titles of nobility, how else can one explain them except by juxtaposition, by comparison or with explanations? Or else rites - e.g. purification, what exactly does that mean in French? It is almost an empty word compared with the word in my language. There it implies an entire ritual, a ceremony which requires the presence of the whole village, the suspect who is accused so that he can publicly confess his fault, and there is corporal or psychological punishment etc. - the word already implies an entire tradition, the words do not have the same meaning in translation."

There is a tendency to minimise the importance of tradition and culture, to consider as time wasted an occupation which does not bring in cash rewards or prestige. But no one would agree to having his language and culture taken away from him, they are deemed to be part of him - a starting point for any healthy and logical development. Without them, one would be promoting alienation. Cultural heritage and integration into the local environment are the basis for a balanced development - this is widely recognised and pushes African educators to want to adapt school programmes. Language has a prominent role to play:

> ...the relevance (of education) also requires taking account of the conditions of the surroundings, the needs and expectations of populations, in the cultural field. Since language is the living instrument of culture and means of communication, its use is very important, both for education and for economic and social development (Haidara and Lemay 1989:77)

**4.2. Social and intellectual discrepancies**

The discrepancies which always exist between theoretical knowledge and its practical application can only be increased where they are reinforced by the use of two quite different languages. Theoretical knowledge passes through one, business and daily life through the other. Moreover, these discrepancies are systematically solidified by the linguistic requirements of state education. Theoretical facts disseminated by schools are often derived from other cultures and have to clear the obstacle of another language before being popularised and useful in the local context. By preventing the use of local languages the school implicitly renders suspect

any intellectual activity in this language and limits the mutual enrichment of the two areas, i.e. local language and culture, practical life, 'village' resourcefulness on the one hand, and official language, theoretical knowledge, intellectual life, 'town', status and formal job on the other. It is difficult to judge how far there exists a general awareness of these facts and their consequences. It is perhaps even more difficult to imagine the possibilities and the potential for innovation which this situation conceals. The integration of local languages into the education system is a precondition for awakening these potentialities; this integration can neither be a simple outcome, nor make up the whole programme.

The discrepancies produced by the implanted Western school show up on both the social and scientific levels. Two examples cited in interviews will serve to illustrate this problem.

4.2.1. Social level

The social identity of the individual and the group rests on a number of cultural phenomena, of which language is one. Thus linguistic attitudes reflect the sense of belonging socially.

> Education secretary: "My mother tongue... gives me a sense of belonging to a tribe, to a group of people you want to belong to, a family group, that's valuable... You don't want to feel that you are only there like a foreigner, you need to be where you are accepted."

Taking up this idea, having cultural roots also contributes to one's self-esteem. A school where one denies and punishes the use of a language which transmits this feeling of belonging and acceptance is bound to affect this esteem, perhaps without meaning to. What the child observes in his environment, what he learns in family life and in the community is of no use to him at all at school. He is obliged to start again from scratch, to learn to speak, to operate in a world which has no relation to his own experience. What he sees at home and in the community does not signify or is even stigmatised. Striking at the language as an instrument and symbol can thus be felt as striking at one's personal and social identity.

> Section head: "He who loses his language is like a prisoner

who has lost the key of the prison. Without the key he will die in prison."

Education secretary: "In school, I was beaten for speaking my language; but then we were children, we were told what to do and not to do, you just obeyed blindly."
Interviewer: "How did you feel?"
Education secretary: "Resentful, we could not see why we shouldn't speak our language, we kept on speaking it outside of school. At that time, the local language looked an inferior thing. We would not learn to speak English, if we continued to speak the local language. There was reason behind it and they told us that it wasn't a question of annihilating the local language. It was rather: you know your language, keep it and learn English."

Inspector: "Teaching another language without taking account of one's own language led to the rejection of this language. Now (in the PROPELCA project) right from the start of his studies the child considers his language as a cultural asset which must not be lost along the way. The child will see that it is normal to use his language without prejudice."

4.2.2. Intellectual level

The absence of modern scientific terms in many African languages is well known. The discrepancies produced by the school go beyond lexicological creation as shown by the following comments, drawn from a researcher and a mechanic. The researcher, thus of a very high level of scholastic ability, can only conceive and structure the problem in French. The mechanic, of a low level of scholastic achievement, creates for himself a solution in his local language by using loan-words or circumlocutions. Neither of them has learned how to explain directly in the local language phenomena coming from elsewhere - something that would obviously be quite possible.

Interviewer: "If you were to explain to your son how a car works, do you think you would do it in your own language or in French?"
Researcher: "Both, within the same conversation. The basic syntax would be in our mother tongue but mixed with expressions to such an extent that anyone who did not speak my language would still know what I was talking about, there being so many borrowings. For example, 'letting in the clutch', (laughs). I can try to create the concept: lift the foot from this foot - I don't know....I would look for terms that were not correct, which translate approximately, but to be precise, I would borrow from the French. Pedal is in fact 'foot'. But putting your foot on the foot? There is a risk of saying; you put your left foot on this foot. Or else - with a bike that works - no, it's



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> going to be difficult because there are wheels which are the feet, the pedal isn't going to be the foot also. This creation makes it necessary for the expression to be placed in the whole environment for it to find its place there, so as to contrast with the other expressions."

This same question was put to a mechanic who had never finished his schooling. He did not hesitate to use the French borrowings or descriptive terms from his own language to describe a process he knew well. He did not care about being consistent and he would alternate a borrowing and a descriptive term for the same object or action. He did not even appreciate that this description might be difficult in linguistic terms.

The use of the national language to describe a complicated process of modern technology is not such a problem for someone who lives with it in practice, but rather for the intellectual who is used to learning and thinking about his work in the official language and who probably rarely has an occasion to do likewise in his mother tongue. One can therefore imagine that the mechanic would explain his problems at the theoretical level more easily in his own tongue. At the same time, a research engineer who was used to using his own language for his theoretical work would also be better able to think about practical problems, and thus be better able to transfer his technical knowledge to a practical application. If school gave him the habit of juggling facts in two languages, the linguistic transfer would not cause him any great problems. Evidence of this is the famous example of the Senegalese mathematician, Sakhir Thiam, who taught set theory in Wolof; he felt that his students had a deeper understanding of this theory than they would have acquired if taught in French. (Mende 1982).

**5. The local language as a means of communication**

The ethnic language is the best vehicle for a cultural heritage. What may cause surprise, after so many years of promoting official languages, is that the local language is still used as the language of communication - the preferred language when it is a question of 'discussing serious matters' or 'discussing a complex problem', 'exploring one's inner self', 'if one is distressed', 'if you want to put the other person at ease', to 'relax, take the air' when 'among friends', and so on. It is also a

necessary language, to be certain of being understood, to facilitate expression.

> Inspector: "When someone speaks French I sometimes feel one is not understood. Speak L1, you are quite small, you speak, you speak, I understand. We express ourselves better than in French."
>
> Teacher: "It is L1 that we understand perfectly. As for French, we just translate passively. What you understand perfectly in your own language, compositions, essays, in French you are not at ease, you have more ideas in your mother tongue."

In communicating, the inability to write the national languages that one speaks is a handicap in the sense that one is limited to the language of school when it comes to writing. The church is often the only institution where the national languages are used in written form. This incapacity creates a lack of imagination for the possibilities and use of writing in national languages - languages which are nevertheless better spoken and understood by a large section of the population. A situation like the following is considered 'normal'.

The secretary of a community meeting (savings club, village committee, cultural association etc.) takes notes and writes the minutes in the official language even if the entire discussion was held in the local language. At the next meeting he reads back his minutes in the local language, because "not everybody would understand French". Questioned as to why he does not write in the local language, it was found that he had never thought about it. In one case, he could even write in his own language! Moreover, the minutes did not have to be submitted to anyone outside - it was something exclusively concerning people speaking that local language.

One could continue to quote examples where writing in the local language would be useful or even necessary for the effective communication of information.

- instructions for the use of medication, pesticides, insecticides, fertilisers, etc.
- political, legal information (as for example the excellent INADES brochure on the rights and duties of the citizen), messages from administrators, etc.

-health education (posters in dispensaries, hospitals).
-agricultural promotion
-community newspapers, rural press.

At present one often has to give up trying to inform the whole population and be content to inform those who can understand and read information in the official language. With bilingual L1/OL education we can also imagine that members of parliament, party members, administrators, write their messages in the local language or bilingually, and that nurses, doctors, agricultural promoters and others can prepare a summary of their presentations in at least one local language.

Using local languages for education in this way would send positive cultural messages. When the local language is the means of education, it becomes an analytical tool, worthy in itself of systematic attention and research. The fact of learning and evolving intellectually by means of the local language would signal that one can be educated and at the same time retain African culture - better retain it in fact. Cultural identity and social cohesion are thereby strengthened.

Castles in Spain? A dream? Yes, to the extent that one imagines a generalised L1/OL bilingualism in all the institutions, ministries and associations of a country. Unrealistic? Not at all, to the extent that a L1/OL bilingualism finds its proper place in the education system. As we have shown by presenting a particular case, the possibility exists and similar experiments are already laying down sound foundations.

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